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AUTHOR Davies, Norman F.; Omberg, Margaret
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ABSTRACT

The main tasks of the foreign language writing class should be to focus on the writing process and to help the students see their work as an act of communication with value in itself. An important means of encouraging good writing is the provision of good readers during the composition stage. A Swedish undergraduate course in English as a second language uses peer readers during the prewriting and revision stages. During prewriting, peer group work is used for brainstorming for ideas and for selecting, grouping, and organizing the ideas to make an outline. During revision of the first draft, peers respond helpfully to the ideas, presentation, and language in each other's essays. A survey found that most students reacted favorably to the use of peer group interaction, attributing changes in their own writing to the peer group sessions and providing suggestions to their classmates during those periods. A few felt they had not learned anything from the sessions. The technique encourages the students to resolve common and basic language errors early in the process and among themselves, enabling the teacher to concentrate on style and coherence; moreover, it is a useful practice for students planning to teach. (MSE)

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Peer Group Teaching and the Composition Class

Norman F. Davies and Margaret Omberg
University of Linköping, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

The writing process has received relatively little attention in research on foreign language teaching, yet writing is a valuable communicative skill which fosters the clear expression of thought and feeling. It is a means of (self-)discovery as well as a linguistic discipline. Peer groups have been found to be valuable at various stages in the writing process, and a course is described and evaluated which uses them at the pre-writing and revision stages as a (cost-free) supplement to teacher instruction and evaluation.

Neglect of Writing

The writing process has never been a major concern of foreign language teaching. Goals and methodologies have been and are variously centred around grammar-translation, reading for culture or instruction, mastery of the grammatico-syntactical system, or, predominantly in recent times, the establishment of accurate speech habits. Writing has at best been seen as an adjunct to these major pursuits.

In 1963, J.B. Carroll's Research on Teaching Foreign Languages reported research on grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary and reading, but none on writing (as pointed out by Azabdaftari, 1982). In 1982 Zamel claimed that research on ESL composition was still almost negligible and Krashen (1984) makes the same point. Writing assignments are usually made with the specific purpose of testing mastery of grammar; the emphasis is on surface features. Whether this is because grammar is more easily taught or because composition is not felt to be the business of the foreign language teacher, is difficult to say.

Linguistics has traditionally been concerned with the sentence; it has more recently devoted some interest to sentence connectors and selected aspects of rhetorical structure, but attention to the writing process as a means of structuring thought has been rare. There is evidence, however, that this concern with process is growing, especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries, which have traditionally been more essay-oriented

than elsewhere. English writing programmes have long played an important part in undergraduate studies in the United States, and the schools programmes developed in the Bay City area of California have now been adopted statewide and are receiving widespread publicity. As their Handbook for Planning an Effective Writing Program (1983:3) states: "Perhaps the most widely ignored research finding is that the teaching of formal grammar, if divorced from the process of writing, has little or no effect on the writing ability of students. Studies from 1906 through 1976 have repeatedly reached this conclusion." Indeed, they note that some researchers find that grammar taught in isolation has a negative effect on writing skills. (Krashen (1984) reports studies which show that increased reading at the expense of grammar instruction leads to a greater improvement in writing.)

Justification for Writing

It may be that some language teachers do not see the justification for devoting valuable classroom time to the writing skill, which they may think has increasingly marginal utility in a technological world. It is significant, however, that the Bay Area Writing Program has evolved in the heartlands of Silicon Valley. Again, to quote the Handbook (1983:2): "An effective writing program ... helps students to discover that writing is a way of learning about one's self and about the world, of developing thinking skills, of generating new ideas, and of helping one to survive in an increasingly dynamic and complicated society."

The goal of communicative competence must apply even to writing, and the essay should not be merely a boring exercise to practice language patterns. Clear expression of thought and feeling is, after all, the major language skill. Essay writing and other forms of composition should ideally encourage the formation, the logical ordering and the lucid presentation of ideas. Above a certain threshold of linguistic competence, the reader in the real world, as apart from the conventional language classroom, is more likely to be impressed by superior content and disposition than by superior linguistic accuracy. As Green and Hecht (1985: 88-89) note in a comparison of native and non-native evaluation of learners' errors in written discourse: "Native speakers are more concerned about errors affecting meaning than those affecting accuracy, and relatively few errors do affect meaning. They are concerned

about meaning because they approach learners' language in the way native speakers are conditioned to approach any sample of their own language: they expect it to tell them something. Non-native teachers of the language, who usually communicate with their learners in the shared native language if communication is their overriding purpose, are conditioned to approach learners' language in the way they have usually taught it: they focus mainly on form, and communication of meaning is secondary and often simulated. Not surprisingly, they are much more disturbed by errors of form and may even overlook errors of meaning."

Dissatisfaction with the product of instruction which too narrowly concentrates on formal accuracy or largely ignores the writing skills altogether is growing, however. In Sweden, mother-tongue instruction in the 'gymnasium' (16-19 age range) is allocated only three 40-minute periods per week ("internationally this is the lowest figure I have come across" notes Björk, 1985: 28), and the teachers themselves are often inadequately trained in writing skills, which results in a vicious circle of neglect. This has led to the TUAP project (Text Structuring in Expository Prose: an Investigation into University Student Writing), a 2-year investigation of expository writing by university students in 5 departments: Business Administration, History of Literature, English, Law and Journalism. It has also encouraged a change in the practice of teaching composition in the English Department at Stockholm which has directly inspired our own work in Linköping.

Writing is, of course, in many ways harder to teach than other language activity and requires more skills to be applied. Raimes (1983) points out that teaching and learning ESL composition involve the huge but separate fields of composing and second language acquisition, which rarely meet in professional conferences or publications. The spoken language and the written language each have their own conventions and may even be seen as different dialects. The situations in which they occur are different; the process of negotiating meanings must be more carefully thought out when there is no immediate feedback or possibility of the addressee requesting elucidation. Coherence, often implicit in conversation, needs to be made more explicit in writing by cohesive devices but also by logical and well thought out presentation. At the same time a package that is empty of content, no matter how well wrapped, is a fraudulent product of little value.

Discovery or Discipline?

Most 'teaching' of writing in foreign language instruction is of a traditional kind, seeing the essay as a product to be judged according to linguistic criteria. Indeed, essays will frequently only be required in examinations. Modern thinking, however, focusses on the process rather than the product and seeks improvement in the various stages through which a piece of writing goes, or rather, should go.

There is, however, a clear contrast between those who stress the student's freedom to write, seen as a process of (self-)discovery (e.g. Zamel 1982, 1983) and those who mainly emphasize disposition, order, presentation, logic etc. (e.g. Donley 1976, 1978). The latter view is clearly seen in the following quotation: "The reverence for original creativeness in writing dies hard. People find it difficult to accept the fact that the use of language is the manipulation of fixed patterns; that these patterns are learned by imitation, and that not until they have been learned can originality occur in the manipulation of the patterns or in the choice of variables within the patterns." (Anita Pinacas, 1963, quoted in Azabdaftari, 1982: 36) Against this can be set the finding that "proficient ESL writers, like their native language counterparts, experience writing as a process of creating meaning. Rather than knowing from the outset what it is they will say, these students explore their ideas and thoughts on paper, discovering in the act of doing so not only what these ideas and thoughts are, but also the form with which best to express them" (Zamel, 1983: 168). In this view, writing is seen as a process of discovery of meaning, whereby we learn about our own thought-processes and ideas. As E.M. Forster pointed out, "I don't know what I think until I see what I've said."

Clearly, the two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. However, the idea that full linguistic competence must be achieved before creativity is allowed to intervene must be rejected. The 'manipulation of fixed patterns' is likely to kill motivation and stultify initiative if divorced from the creation of meaning and expression of self. Nobody would suggest such a barren denial of free expression in mother-tongue teaching, where the standard of pattern manipulation can be poor indeed. Discovery and discipline must go hand in hand; the one

should not wait upon the other.

The Writing Process

The basic phases of the writing process have been identified as: prewriting, writing, responding, revising, editing, evaluating and postwriting (e.g. Björk, 1985; Handbook, 1983; Healy, 1980; Zamel, 1982).

Prewriting, as Björk points out, has been largely ignored in traditional teaching, where students can be faced with unprepared topics to which little thought has been given. Raimes (1983:266), on the other hand, sees the choosing of topics as "the teacher's most responsible activity." The students should be given the opportunity to see freshly, to write, to form ideas, and to write for a responsive reader. The teacher can also predict structures likely to be generated by a given topic and train them.

Writing is seen as the production of the first draft, where the primary focus is likely to be on content (provided composition is seen as the communication of ideas and not as a mere language exercise). In product-oriented teaching, the first draft is often virtually the final version.

Responding involves one or more readers, who will, if properly encouraged and trained, give helpful praise and criticism, query doubtful or unclear passages, indicate areas of suspected error, and generally allow the writer to see his or her work through other eyes.

Revision: On the basis of reader responses and, perhaps, the author's evolving ideas, the first draft will be revised, the revision process being seen as mainly concerned with the content and coherence of the essay. In the process model, the revision stage is seen as critical. Students may indeed learn as much from what is rejected as from what is preserved.

Editing, finally, will check the surface features of language and layout and, where appropriate, references, quotations, facts and figures.

Evaluation of the revised version will then be undertaken by the teacher, who will seek to treat the thought content and general presentation

of the essay at least as seriously as the linguistic aspects. The teacher may require a final revised and corrected version to be written.

Post-writing activities may include essays being read aloud, circulated, posted on the notice-board, published in a class or school magazine, or used as the basis of other exercises. It aims to show that the compositions have a value in themselves, and are not merely regarded as a basis for grading.

Zamel (1983) notes that pre-writing, writing and revising are not necessarily linear, but alternate throughout the writing process. The least skilled writers revise only short chunks, piecemeal, while competent practitioners may recast a whole essay in the light of later insights. This is analogous to the strategies used by good and bad readers, where the former are always aware of the wider context, the latter fixated on the immediate problem (Hosenfeld, 1977). Both comprehension and revision are recursive processes. Perl (1980. Quoted in Zamel, 1982) similarly finds that what she calls projective structuring, the ability to anticipate readers' needs and expectations, is not used by less skilled writers, who are inhibited by the requirements of surface correctness. Raimes (1983:268) makes a similar point: "Students in a writing class seldom view their own writing as 'reading' for someone else (that's a lot of what is wrong with it)."

The main tasks of the foreign language composition class, then, should be to focus on the process of writing and to help the students to see their work as an act of communication with a value in itself, not merely as a sort of grammar exercise. An important means of encouraging good writing is the provision of helpful readers during the composition stage (Healy, 1980). This is one of the justifications for the use of peer groups. Krashen (1984), who gives a useful survey of previous research, suggests that feedback has been shown to be useful only if given during the writing process, i.e. between drafts.

The Use of Peer Groups

The California Handbook for Planning an Effective Writing Program lists a number of activities that research has proved to be effective in improving writing skills:

- sentence combining exercises
- quantity of practice, but only if combined with responses from peers or teachers
- praise of the good features more than correction of the bad
- extensive reading and study of written prose
- pre-writing activities in groups
- modelling, editing in groups, imitating prose models, teacher participation.

The present paper will concentrate on a scheme adopted in the English Department of Linköping University using peer groups for the pre-writing and response stages. Arguments that have been advanced for the use of peer groups in training writing are given in Chaudron (1984:2-3), summarizing the findings of Witbeck (1976), Partridge (1981), Bolin, Berezin and Golding (1982), and Brinton (1983):

"1. Teachers' time may be saved by eliminating certain editing tasks, thus freeing them for more helpful instruction and guidance;

2. Peers' feedback is more at the learner's level of development or interest, thus perceived as more informative than the superior or older teacher's feedback, despite the assumption that the teacher 'knows more';

3. Since multiple peers may be used, learners gain a sense of a wider audience than simply the one teacher;

4. Learners' attitudes toward writing can be enhanced by the more socially supportive peers;

5. Learners also learn more about writing and revision by having to read each others' drafts critically."

To these points we may add the findings of Mary K. Healy (1980:2): "From systematically using small response groups in the classroom, I have noted the following evolving characteristics in student writing: more specificity of detail, more supporting examples, more transitional and introductory phrases directed at the reader, and, as a consequence of a combination of the above, more fluent and complete pieces of writing."

In our Department, we have long made use of small groups in training spoken fluency (Davies 1980, 1982) and both we and the students were therefore mentally prepared to use them in the service of writing. Another persuasive factor was that the actual group meetings, which are timetabled, do not need to be teacher-led, and therefore cost nothing. At the time of writing, we have run the scheme for two years, and evaluated it by questionnaire and by tangible results. It is still under development, but we are well pleased with progress so far.

A full-time undergraduate course in English lasts a maximum of three semesters in Sweden, where combined degrees are the rule. In the first term of instruction, three essays are written before the end-of-term exam, which includes composition. We would like to write more, but with our very unfavourable teacher-student ratio and wide variety of courses, we cannot afford it. Classroom preparation involves such areas as paragaph construction, topic and expansion, cohesive devices and punctuation, introduction and conclusion, essay development and typology. A topic is then given, and the students are divided into groups of three or four.

The Prewriting Phase

The difficulties of finding ideas were delightfully expressed by Max Schulman in a keynote address at the 1982 WHIM Conference, Arizona State University: "I adjusted the goose-neck lamp for minimum eye-strain. I pulled up a straight-back chair. I opened the window. I filled the pitcher with water, I took the phone off the hook, then I sat down and drew isosceles triangles for two hours." Cleggett and Rico (1980) suggest a technique to encourage the flow of ideas, which they call 'clustering'. The teacher writes a key word on the chalkboard, then surrounds it with associated words suggested by students. The students draw lines to show relationships between words in the cluster. We have not found such introductory techniques necessary, however, as a prelude to the first scheduled meeting of the groups, which begins with brain-storming around the topic. In response to the 1985 questionnaire's question "Do you think the brainstorming sessions in groups have improved your ability to find ideas around a given topic?", 34 answered "yes" (n = 41). The questionnaire given the previous year contained the less

defined question, "What aspects of essay writing were made easier by this system?" and the answer was almost unanimously the collecting of ideas produced by the brainstorming sessions (20 out of 26).

Having gathered ideas, the group is asked to select, group and organize them to make an outline essay. In response to the question: "Has group work on organizing ideas into logical sequence and into paragraphs improved your own ability to do this?", 23 agreed that it had, 7 disagreed and 10 were unsure. (Where $n \neq 41$, it indicates that the question was left blank by one or more students.) At university level, many may feel they already have this ability, or that teacher instruction is enough. In fact, when asked to state which they felt to be most effective in training the disposition of ideas and good paragraph structure, 8 chose teacher instruction alone, 1 group work alone, and 31 a combination of both.

Writing and Responding

Having decided jointly on an outline, the students write their first drafts individually at home. These are then handed in for duplication, so that at the group meeting the following week, each group member has a copy of the drafts written by the other group members. In the writing process, it is likely that each will have departed in some measure from the agreed outline (only 11 claimed not to have done so). The main reasons given are that there was disagreement within the group, or that only certain main ideas were agreed on, or also that the process of writing produced new trains of thought.

Each member of the group reads his or her essay to the others, who are supposed to respond helpfully to the ideas and presentation and also assist in language editing. In fact, only 2 claimed that they had not, as a group, made suggestions or asked for clarification "on the ideas expressed or other points of content" while 18 replied "yes, but rarely", 17 "sometimes" and 3 "often". This result is a little disappointing, suggesting that half the groups paid attention predominantly to surface features (see below). However, it must be remembered that the ideas expressed had largely been agreed on beforehand, as had the general disposition, so that less revision could be expected than if the contents of the first drafts had been quite unknown to the responders.

A later question asked about changes made to the first draft that affected content, ideas and essay organization. Only five students attributed these to the group sessions, while 19 saw them as growing out of the process of rewriting. In contrast, 38 attributed changes in the surface features mainly to peer correction. For the future, we hope to arrange response groups for an unseen first draft, and devote more attention to training in useful responses (see Healy, 1980).

Language corrections were made in all cases, "a few" by 10, "some" by 15, "many" by 16. Asked to rank the types of correction by frequency, the respondents to the questionnaire produced the following average order: grammatical, lexical, spelling, stylistic (e.g. English seen as awkward or "Swenglish"), coherence and cohesion. This order reflects the editing competence of the groups rather than the frequency of errors, where stylistic infelicities and coherence breaks would rank higher.*

There is no doubt, however, that the groups tidy away many of the more common and basic language errors before they reach the final version, which enables the teacher to concentrate more attention on style and coherence. This is one result of group work which we had hoped for, and is, in itself, very useful practice for those students who intend to become teachers. Only 4 students felt they had not learnt anything from peer correction.

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*Eleanor Wikborg of Stockholm University has done some useful research on coherence breaks (Wikborg, 1985), showing that five types account for 79,5% of all cases diagnosed in the sample material, i.e. (in order of frequency):

1. uncertain inference ties
2. misleading paragraph division
3. missing or misleading sentence connection
4. unjustified change of or drift in topic
5. unspecified topic

The students were encouraged to comment freely on the pros and cons of peer response and correction. The most frequently mentioned advantages were that it is difficult to see one's own errors without help (9 students) and that one learns from others' mistakes (8 students). To these we may add 7 students who felt that they had achieved a better understanding of the sources of error because they had more time to discuss them or explain how they arose. 3 mentioned the opportunity for discussion with peers, without further details. 8 felt that they had learned both to give and take criticism, while 7 welcomed the new ideas they were given or the help in formulating their own ideas. Other points mentioned were the good training for future teachers, learning to adjust to readers and that group work was 'fun'. When taken as a whole, the system has markedly increased the students' confidence when it comes to essay-writing. Only 3 out of 26 (1984) and 2 out of 12 (a separate 1985 questionnaire) said their confidence had not been increased, and all of them noted that this was largely due to a new awareness of the skills necessary to produce good writing.

The range of disadvantages adduced was small, and 18 either made no comments here or wrote 'none' (only 6 chose not to list any advantages). Overwhelmingly the main disadvantage was, predictably, either the lack of expertise in the group when faced with errors (7 students) or, indeed, that the group made faulty corrections (10 students). This supports the finding of Partridge (1981:60) that students "doubted the quality and accuracy of their peers' corrections and comments". One student, surprisingly, found this point an advantage, and it may be that the final correction by the teacher would thereby be given added prominence. The only other disadvantage given more than a single mention was the difficulty in being critical for fear of hurting each others' feelings. This may be an added explanation of the predominance of surface corrections: it is obviously easier to correct a language error than to complain of faulty logic in the construction of an essay. Perhaps this should lead to training in the polite formulation of criticism, a useful skill in itself!

When asked to suggest improvements, a sizeable minority (16 of 38) suggested more teacher participation. Both the 1984 and the 1985 groups wanted a teacher available for consultation while the first-draft editing was in progress, and both groups wanted more comments from the teacher

on the final corrected version. Some also felt the need for a timetabled group discussion on the teacher's corrections of their essays. We are therefore now making a teacher available in his or her room for consultation during the group sessions, but for both pedagogical and financial reasons, we do not intend to introduce regular teacher participation. Group sessions have their own dynamic which, at least at an advanced level, functions independently of and often better without the teacher. We see this as an important form of semi-autonomous learning; to quote E.M. Forster once again: "Spoon feeding in the long run teaches us nothing but the shape of the spoon." However, in view of previous research reported by Chaudron (1984), it is important to stress that we regard peer revision and teacher revision as complementary, and not as alternatives.

Evaluation and the Teacher's Role

The three teachers in our department who regularly teach or evaluate the writing skill as such must admit that for years we concentrated very largely, and in the final examination almost exclusively, on mastery of the linguistic and graphological features of English (though we have always insisted on training and rating division into paragraphs). We have in no way relaxed our standards in this respect. Accuracy must be demanded at university level, especially in future teachers. We are, on the other hand, critical of the often stultifying effects of an obsession with accuracy at lower levels.

As suggested above, we are now, however, encouraging our students and ourselves to see the composition class as much more than language training, and this must therefore be reflected in evaluations. "Good beginnings, felicitous phrases, pertinent word choice, smooth transitions, sound logic, humour, realistic and lively detail should all be praised so that students feel that what they have to say is of prime importance and get a sense of what they can do well" (Raimes, 1983: 267). The teacher response must be specific and intended to reinforce good writing as much as discourage error, sloppiness or muddled thinking.

Because students perhaps realistically assume that only that which is tested in examinations is really important, we now also give a separate grade for ideas, argument and disposition. All examination essays are

independently graded by two examiners, and we have noted a high degree of inter-scorer reliability (over 80%). On a five-point scale, there has only once been a difference of two points, where the second examiner judged that the essay, though good in itself, did not deal with the set topic.

Despite the mutual aid given in the response groups, the majority (26 of 41) still feel they learn more from teacher corrections. 28 agree that they learned different things from the teacher than they did from the group. Comments reveal by and large that the group supplied ideas and words and pointed out performance errors that were in fact usually within the competence of the student involved, while the teacher was a more reliable authority for difficult points of grammar, lexis and phraseology.

Conclusions

Peer group work for composition classes has been popular with our students, only one being of the opinion that the number of sessions (six in all) was too many. There is no support for the idea that peer groups could replace teacher-led classes, but they are a popular complement to the curriculum, not least for their social usefulness. With very few exceptions, everyone enjoyed working in these small groups, and they provided the first-term students with immediate social contact and a sense of security. The result was highly beneficial for the atmosphere in the class as a whole. There were numerous suggestions for other areas in which they could be of use; discussion of set books, grammar and translation classes being the most popular. During the second term when we teach précis writing, another important but generally neglected skill, we use peer groups in much the same way as for essay writing (this will be the subject of a later article).

The value of response groups in the composition class lies less in the amount of editing they save the teacher, than in the added emphasis they place on composition as a process, as an activity of intrinsic value, where what is said and the way it is argued or presented is seen as quite as important as the grammatical accuracy of the final product. As for the final product itself, there is no doubt that the combination individual effort - peer group discussion - teacher instruction

and evaluation does develop a better standard of essay writing in a shorter time. There is no question that there has been a great improvement in the quality of essays submitted since this system was introduced, not only in the elimination of elementary errors, but in the construction and cohesion of the writing produced. We aim to develop fluency in writing, just as we already value it in comprehension and the spoken word.

During the second term, students are required to submit a 2000 word term paper, in which we begin to train the techniques and methodology of the academic research paper, including the proper use of critical sources. Third term students must submit a 15-20 page research report, which is preceded by a six-hour course on academic writing based on Björk-Wikborg (1981) and seminars which discuss previous papers. For both these research projects, many students have now suggested we introduce peer group work to complement tutorial work and seminars.

Apart from the respect which group work inspires for the process of writing and the undoubted consequent improvement in the final product, it encourages the stimulation of ideas, and the build-up of confidence. It fosters intellectual exchange, a critical sense and the ability to give and take criticism, also to play the teacher role to some extent. The experience of mutual help and inspiration has an important social value, especially among students who have not known each other for long. These factors make the system a popular one, as stated, and have helped to give the business of writing added dignity.

"Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man" claimed Francis Bacon ('Of Studies'). The writing skill has been much neglected under the dominance of audilingualism; it is time it was rehabilitated in foreign language study both for its communicative value and its unique contribution to what Raimes calls TSL: Thinking in a Second Language.

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